

One thing catches my attention in looking back at these studies, which was not consciously present when they were written. They grew, indeed, at haphazard.

I wrote of what I enjoyed. After a certain number had been written, it appeared that there was so much French influence in them that they had better take their present name. It was later still that I realised the especial dominance of Montaigne; and so, last but one, was written the essay on him. But what strikes me finally, in re-reading, about this series of writers from the author of the *Works and Days* to the author of *Les Plaisirs et les Jours*, is the tendency of serious literature to grow ever more delicate, more cloistered, more eccentric. The Muse has turned nun. Hesiod's work is just as alive with imaginative beauty as Proust's; and yet through its practical pages blows the wind of the open fields. It may be far less subde; it is far more sane. The Middle Ages of Langland may be darkened with misery and mania; yet even they could produce the sanity of Chaucer, and of Chaucer's characters. Their superstition is not paralysed, like modern scepticism. They inhabited a haunted castle, not a sterile desert. With the coming of the Renaissance, Ronsard and Montaigne in spite of physical illness not only wrote books, but lived lives that still seem worth while. In Dorothy Osborne, in Herbert, or in Crabbe, their

healthy sense of reality has not been
undermined by their
sensitiveness; though in both clerical poets
there does
appear a new sense of frustration, a sadness
of minds at
war within. But when we come to Beddoes,
Flaubert,
and Proust, genius seems now to impoverish
writers'
lives, as well as enriching them. Art becomes
the pearl of
a sick oyster. The brain corrodes body and
heart. These
instances are far too few to generalise from.
Yet the
general view of the Goncourts has already
been quoted,